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ABSTRACT

In order to explain the role that the university can play in the struggle against illiteracy, a distinction must be made between "social" illiterate people, who are dominated by oral tradition, and functional, or "uneducated" illiterate people, who usually know how to read and write, but without having sufficient understanding to draw any critical conclusions--and who then relapse into illiteracy. Since the university today is accessible to many more people than formerly, it can and should contribute effectively to the process of democratizing and renovating the education system as a whole. More especially, it must play a role in the struggle against illiteracy and in the development of culture and knowledge. Besides the major role traditionally assigned to it (research and education), the university should devote part of its time to the three major tasks of encouraging better cultural, economic, and social development. Ways in which the university is accomplishing these tasks include adult programs, such as the Open University; services to migrants and physically handicapped persons; and computer literacy courses. Teachers and researchers should assist in combating illiteracy through reflection and research, research and development, the training of instructors and teachers, and creation of teaching materials. University students can also contribute by preparing reports and tutoring illiterate persons. (KC)

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LITERACY LESSONS

CE 055 138

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

The university and literacy

by Georges Tohmé

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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INTRODUCTION

In order to explain the role which the university can play in the struggle against illiteracy and the lack of education, we first must make a distinction between the 'social' illiterate, who is dominated by oral tradition, and the functional (or 'uneducated' illiterate), who grows up in a world in which writing plays a major part, as is typical of the industrialized countries. In fact, while an illiterate is unable to read or write, an 'uneducated' person, in contrast, knows how to read and write more or less correctly, but without having sufficient understanding of it to draw any critical conclusions. He may have learned how to read and write, but, due to the lack of practice, he relapses into illiteracy, hence the notion of the 'neo-illiterate' or the 'illiterate repeater'.

RECOMMENDATION No. 58
TO THE MINISTRIES OF EDUCATION
CONCERNING LITERACY AND ADULT EDUCATION

Higher education, which should have an important role in adult education, should achieve its purpose first by opening its regular programmes more widely to adult students, and secondly by providing special courses for adults in particular subjects.

International Conference on Public Education, 1965

Today, the university is accessible to many more people than formerly. Consequently, it can and should, through its various departments, contribute effectively to the process of democratizing and renovating the education system as a whole, but more especially it must play a role in the struggle against illiteracy in its different forms through its teachers, personnel and students, of course, but also as a place *par excellence* for the development of culture and knowledge. Besides the main role traditonally assigned to it, namely research

and education, the university should devote part of its time to the three major tasks of encouraging better cultural, economic and social development.

In January 1989, the International Conference on Education recommended, among other things, that the diversification of post-secondary education should be based on the following general principles and key concepts:

- *stepping up the contribution of post-secondary education, particularly at university level, to the strengthening and extension of lifelong education;*
- *increasing the contribution of post-secondary education to the development of other levels and forms of education in the context of lifelong education, and particularly to those training and research activities designed to bring about a massive reduction in illiteracy;*
- *encouraging universities and other institutions of higher education to function also as centres for continuing individualized and distance education.*

Extract from Recommendation No. 76 to Ministries of Education

Interactions between the university and the community – of which it is an integral part – are already very close in the developed countries and are being increasingly emphasized in a number of developing countries. These activities affect basic education, both with regard to the fundamental teaching of the elementary school and to adult education. As we know, besides a mastery of reading, writing and arithmetic, basic education covers a basic knowledge of agriculture, nutrition, hygiene, etc. In the case of adults, this education is broader and includes the correction of insufficient education (functional illiteracy) and lifelong education (retraining, vocational and advanced training, school re-enrolment, etc.).

The role played by today's university, therefore, consists in improving and updating the cultural level of graduates and non-graduates. Consequently, it offers adults special programmes in which teachers, researchers and students are closely associated.

The purpose of the university is to provide access to higher studies for as many citizens as possible. This is the real meaning of the 'democratization of education', which is not only the equality of access to education but also and above all equality of opportunities for success, and therefore for continuing one's studies. In most countries, the present tendency is to broaden access to the university for the masses rather than for the élite. Higher studies are no longer a privilege reserved for young people from well-to-do families. Hence there is greater equality between rich and poor, between men and women, between professional workers and intellectuals. Accordingly, non-formal education has developed in several Member States. Universities open to the masses have multiplied and are placing knowledge and culture within the reach of all; that is a role of primary importance for the university.

Educational programmes offered to adults by the university

Different kinds of programmes are available: guided seminars, evening courses or those given outside working hours, teaching by correspondence and television. These seminars or courses can generally be given within the university. Students are offered several possibilities or arrangements: they can either devote all their free time to their studies, or follow only a part of the established programme. Studies can last for the normal length of time or up to twice as long. These courses are generally well attended, especially when the learner is motivated by a desire to change his job or to obtain a promotion. They lead to a diploma upon completion of the studies, or a certificate of successful or conscientious achievement. The university's role is to complete an education which has been previously acquired but is inadequate or forgotten. The objective of lifelong education offered to professional workers

and technicians is to raise the level of their qualifications or to retrain them. Increasingly today, expanding the knowledge of adults is becoming one of the objectives of the university, especially now when advancing technology is making lifelong retraining necessary for professional workers, who must continue to study if they are to remain abreast of the progress of science. The students are of all ages and all levels.

ABOUT A GRANDMOTHER

Several universities open their doors to all who want to continue to learn. They organize courses, lectures and workshops which admit persons of all ages. Among other things, they can study literature, archaeology, painting, computers and biology.

At a meeting between teachers and parents in a neighbourhood school, a mother asked her daughter's teacher how she could get a small microscope to give to her daughter for her birthday.

Two or three months later, the teacher, recalling the information she had given the mother, asked the girl if she found the microscope interesting. And the girl replied, 'As if I ever had a chance to use it! My grandmother, who is going to the university now, monopolizes my microscope all the time!'

Education is therefore a lifelong affair. The public authorities and the private sector are unanimous in recognizing the fact, whether it concerns the technical and professional fields or specialization in foreign languages. Consequently, the courses often have the benefit of material and psychological measures of encouragement, such as scholarships, the use of flexible work time, etc.

Principal types of university programmes

The Open University was created in the interests of all, to enable those who had been prevented from continuing their studies to enjoy the same equality of opportunities, and to meet everyone's needs. According to countries, the programmes range from learning languages to the use of computers, while also teaching management, economics, mechanical engineering and electronics: it is a multiform, lifelong education which

is especially aimed at the socio-professional classes in which the need is greatest.

The university's field of action in these matters does not stop at its own walls. Distance education is also provided to help those who are prevented from undergoing traditional education. The student may be prevented by the nature of his professional activity, his health, the geographic remoteness of his home or his place of work, or simply for family reasons.

Several countries have established summer and weekend universities which offer many possibilities for learning, both through their programmes and by the flexibility of their teaching methods.

In order to meet the specific needs of certain minority segments of the population, or the lifelong retraining made necessary by the rapid development of certain advanced technologies, special programmes have been set up. For example, they may involve migrants, handicapped persons, or the new users of computers and their application:

UNIVERSITIES AND THE EDUCATIONAL PROSPECTS FOR ADULTS

In the spring of 1984, John Brademas, President of New York University, while addressing the sixty-ninth Annual Conference of the National University Continuing Education Association, spoke about the role that universities could play in opening up the educational prospects for adults during the 1980s. The following resume of his speech outlines five national priorities for the adult education programme:

- *more attention should be directed to education that helps workers in their jobs;*
- *better training should be provided for displaced workers;*
- *equal educational opportunities should be provided for adults;*
- *the rate of adult illiteracy should be slowed;*
- *adults should be assisted to keep up with the phenomenal increase in new knowledge.*

Summary of Brademas, J. Remarks before the National University Continuing Education Association. 69th Annual Conference (Atlanta, GA, April 14–18, 1984).

- Migrants, who are forced to settle in a country whose language they do not know, are considered as uneducated, if not illiterate, in comparison with the users of this language. They are forced to learn it.
- Some physically handicapped persons who have been unable to begin or continue their studies are now in a position to reconsider and to educate themselves. This is possible today thanks to the many facilities offered them by the university.
- With the steadily increasing use of the word-processing sciences, the university is playing a paramount part by reducing the number of so-called 'computer illiterates'. This means that the use of this tool has become so indispensable that some professional workers, such as engineers, managers or certain kinds of teachers, are obliged, in order to keep up to date, to return to the university and to study the different applications of word processing. These applications make it possible to save labour costs, to raise the standard of industrial operations, to increase factory efficiency, to multiply banking operations and to make it easier to transfer from one job to another. The number of possibilities offered by the development of this new technology is infinite. We will all continue to be more or less 'illiterate' with respect to one or another of these innumerable applications.

The sixth Regional Conference of Ministers of Education and those Responsible for Economic Planning of Member States in Latin America and the Caribbean 'recommends to the Member States that they step up their efforts to involve institutions of higher education in achievement of the objectives of the Major Project in the Field of Education', which includes universal primary education, and the elimination of illiteracy by the year 2000, and improvement in the quality and efficacity of education systems.

Recommendation No. 21, MINEDLAC VI, Bogota, March/April 1987.

THE ROLE OF TEACHERS AND RESEARCHERS

The university teaching faculty, as a whole, can and should take part in literacy and retraining campaigns. Teachers are generally called upon to assist in post-literacy campaigns in order to combat neo-illiteracy or functional illiteracy. For this purpose, they must draw up suitable programmes to correct illiteracy in its various forms, to participate as much as possible – as we have seen – in lifelong adult education, to take an active part in instructing teacher trainers and to help in preparing teaching material.

Reflection and research

In the field of the educational sciences, reflection and research should be directed towards solving the problem of illiteracy at the national, regional and international levels. First of all, it is necessary to know the exact degree of illiteracy in a given society and the influence which this can have on the efficiency and economic prosperity of the society. The financial loss involved in the presence of illiterates and uneducated persons could then be calculated for both the public and private sectors and on a national scale. Research should cover the following four fields:

- the effects of literacy programmes on the social environment of illiterate adults, and determination of the necessary educational needs for the campaign against illiteracy to be successful;
- preparation and experimentation of teaching aids and materials (books, brochures, tables, etc.), of teaching methods, evaluation, computer-assisted teaching, distance education, etc.;
- recommendations for a reorganization of the education system as a whole, especially with regard to the education of illiterates, including consideration of its

THE UNIVERSITY'S ASSISTANCE TO PRIMARY EDUCATION

During a visit to the department of educational sciences in a big California university, I was surprised to find that an eminent physicist, who had foreseen the role that the university could play in primary education, was preparing highly simplified material to teach eight-year-old children the principle of action/reaction in physics. In a cardboard box, he had arranged some toys for the teacher's use, with an explanatory note.

This experience shows, first, that a university could and should make its teaching available to those who are just beginning to learn and that, secondly, by taking due regard for the target population, it is always possible to get the message through to them.

qualities and organization, and the training and improvement of different types of personnel;

- preparation of situation studies and basic socio-economic and cultural needs.

Moreover, careful reflection should result in demonstrating the socio-economic impact of education on the individual and on society (greater literacy = better production).

Research and development

Thinking should be directed to the very close relation between research and development. Although scientific research can be carried out in centres and laboratories which are sometimes situated outside the university, research in the field of education can only be conducted within it. Such research work is not exclusive to any particular country. At the forty-first session of the International Conference on Education, held at the beginning of 1989 in Geneva on the subject of post-secondary education, it was stated that in all countries the disequilibrium of education systems was due to the rapid change in the socio-economic environment, and that concern about this was very much the same everywhere. Because of the difficulties confronting the

university at a time when it has to absorb a massive influx of students, it is necessary to develop a system for training skilled personnel who can provide a better quality of teaching.

The spectacular increase in the number of students is due to the increased desire to advance from the primary grades to the secondary level and from there to higher education. Today, everyone, especially in the Third Word, hopes to go to university. It is no longer a matter of selection or the desire to be part of an élite. Nobody wants to perpetuate an élitist idea, which is contrary to the economic development of the countries concerned. Consequently, if the university is to preserve its high level of education, it will have to provide better training for the teachers responsible for basic education. Therefore, it cannot, and must not, shut itself up in an ivory tower or maintain a self-satisfied attitude.

Training instructors, educational personnel and teachers

In order to carry out any literacy campaign and to produce successful adult education programmes, personnel are needed who are responsible for teaching, planning, administering and evaluating this general movement. Moreover, it must be admitted that no progress in the campaign against illiteracy can be made with a shortage of skilled personnel trained for this purpose. This staff must be kept informed of the progress made during this campaign at the national, regional and international levels. The different experience of every country involved in this campaign, as well as the means and methods which have made practical progress possible, must be made widely available. It is the responsibility of the university to become an effective centre for information which is vitally needed for the success of educational projects of this kind.

It is no longer sufficient to have a teaching vocation and to love one's profession in order to become a good teacher who knows how to transmit knowledge. The time of the all-round teacher is past. Teaching has now become a real profession, an art which is learned at the university and which is perfected by practice and experience. To be sure, basic knowledge is still necessary, but today it is indispensable to have, in addition to personal qualities, a thorough knowledge of the pupil's psychology, whatever his age group may be, and the appropriate methods for each discipline. If the quality of primary or secondary teaching has dropped in some countries, this is largely due to the fact that teachers are not properly trained in the university. In addition, it is absolutely necessary to retrain active teachers by inviting them every three or five years to well-organized workshops where they can attend lectures and courses to renew and supplement their knowledge.

Teaching materials

The materials used to teach adults to read or to give beginners some basic instruction can be prepared in the departments of educational science. This material is of a very varied and even unusual nature depending on the countries, and on the age and social classes of the students. It may include textbooks as well as the sim-

TWO SISTERS, TWO EXPERIENCES

Two sisters learned the baker's trade from their parents. One of them stayed in her native village to take care of the family bakery, while the other went with her husband to a big city where she opened a new bakery. The educational level of the two sisters was the same when they were living with their parents. Ten years later, the city sister had acquired a different and higher intellectual level than the country sister, since in the city she could continue her education by attending evening classes at the nearest university, and especially, in her leisure time, visit museums, exhibitions and lectures of general education.

THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION
IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

After pointing out the difficulties met with in the campaign against illiteracy, the Ministers of Education and those Responsible for Economic Planning of the African Member States, meeting at Harare from 28 June to 3 July 1982, gave particular attention to the training of literacy personnel, as well as to 'the production of teaching aids and appropriate textbooks'. Referring to the role of higher education in national development, they emphasized, among other things, that since the universities 'were an integral part of society, it was natural that they should participate in fostering the development of that society'. Further on, they made it clear that 'such participation entailed first and foremost a change in attitude, on the part of academic personnel, to responsible and dedicated commitment and a determination to give precedence to the public interest over their own interests. ... higher education should contribute to development in the full sense of the word and not just to economic growth, and to that end should provide people living in rural areas with better services, drinking-water, improved living conditions, access to education and science and other benefits...'.

plest teaching aids, which can all be used for the acquisition of knowledge.

In order to prepare the textbooks, the author, or preferably authors, must have some experience in educating beginners and especially adults. The textbooks intended for them must first undergo a period of experimentation, during which the comments of the teachers and the reactions of the students will be noted in order to make any necessary improvements. These textbooks should be attractively designed and contain illustrations from everyday life. Moreover, all teaching materials should be simple and easy to use by all, especially since in the campaign against illiteracy it is planned to teach not only reading and writing but certain basic subjects such as arithmetic.

The students' role in the campaign against illiteracy is beginning to take tangible form in the developing countries, especially since the accession of many of these countries to independence. All social classes have been made aware of the problem. Students are called upon to participate in literacy campaigns in the following two ways:

by preparing reports and theses on the subject, especially in teaching faculties;
by para-university action and direct participation in mass literacy classes, held either in the university itself or public buildings, or during the school vacations in more distant areas in order to reach remote rural populations or nomadic people. However, students must be guided in this work and given prior training.

Preparation of theses or reports

Teachers of different grades, educational workers and administrators are generally trained in teaching faculties or departments, or else in normal schools. After completing their second or third year of university education, students are asked to prepare a report or thesis on the results of their studies. The subject chosen by them should be an up-to-date statement of their knowledge about the illiteracy situation in their country. They will carry out inquiries, sample surveys and statistical studies accompanied with commentaries. They will describe the situation in the different classes where there are the highest rates of illiteracy. These studies should help to adapt the educational programme to the special characteristics of each population. In order to ensure more appropriate teacher-training and literacy programmes, due account should

be taken of the results of studying the various socio-cultural groups. These training programmes are indispensable for ensuring the knowledge necessary for the development of the individual and the society.

The students should study other problems, such as the lack of education and backsliding towards illiteracy of persons who have received a certain basic education but have subsequently forgotten what they had learned. Among other things, there will be studies of the problems of drop-outs, grade repetition, post-literacy, neo-illiteracy or functional illiteracy. Several specific problems will also be studied, such as the political, social or economic aspects of literacy for girls, migrants and adults in general.

Students could prepare advertising posters, organize press campaigns, etc. Thus we can envisage ways in which students can actively participate in campaigns against illiteracy.

Active participation

In some countries, students are called upon to perform civic service for the community, in general duties such as reforestation, providing pipelines for of drinking water, preventing forest fires, setting up vacation colonies, training teams for preserving archaeological sites or conducting campaigns for protecting the environment. Several countries, for example, are planning to have students carry out literacy campaigns during their vacations. Two or three illiterate persons are assigned to each student, who makes it a point of honour to succeed in teaching them to read and write. This work can be carried out on university premises or in other public buildings (such as schools or town offices). The students can work in teams. They must learn to criticize themselves and accept the criticisms of others. Criticism will relate to the methods followed, the teaching aids used and the programmes suggested (teaching reading, writing, arithmetic, etc.). After their period of

service, the students and their teachers will hold seminars in which they will describe the difficulties they encountered. Their personal experience will be discussed. All participants will describe their observations. Suggestions and remarks will be exchanged, to the mutual benefit of all. It should be noted that although students sometimes lack the necessary qualifications to carry out their tasks, they make up for it with real enthusiasm and a sincere desire to succeed.

The student may be advised to return to the countryside, sometimes to his native village, where he will perform his civic duty. Illiterate persons are generally more numerous in a rural environment, and if they are unable to go to the city to study, these young teachers can have contact with them directly. The rural environment is reached in this way and education is made available to a larger number of people. Thanks to a widespread publicity campaign, it will be possible to start up practical programmes.

The objectives of the International Literacy Year (1990) can be achieved if all educational centres participate in the proposed programmes. Before the end of the century, universities can help substantially to correct the lack of basic education. They must examine the educational needs of disadvantaged groups and improve teaching personnel and those responsible for planning and project administration via a double approach to literacy: basic education and adult education.

This publication has been produced by the International Bureau of Education within the context of International Literacy Year, 1990.

This is a personal contribution by Georges Tohmé, Director of the International Bureau of Education, to the cause of literacy. Mr Tohmé has had a long career as a professor, administrator and researcher. Before joining Unesco as the Director of the IBE, he served as President of the Lebanese University. He is the author of several scientific and educational publications.

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